

Managing and Monitoring Large Classes

By Peter Duppenhaler

Large classes are not necessarily something to dread. However, they do present teachers with a number of challenges. First, the teacher should be able to easily identify the students and this is especially difficult if one is teaching several large classes at the same time. Second, the teacher needs to have a way to monitor an individual student's progress. Third, the teacher must be able to have easy access to data about the students' language strengths and weaknesses. Fourth, the teacher should be able to respond to the students as individuals, with interests outside the classroom. To solve these challenges, I have created photo roll cards that are very effective in identifying, monitoring, recording, and responding to students.

Photo roll cards are a variation on the standard roll book, but are much easier to manage and certainly a more effective way to deal with large classes. Although many schools require students to submit photographs of themselves for official purposes, these are usually small and unavailable for the classroom teacher to use. Having photo roll cards gives a teacher the freedom to use them in a variety of ways to make learning and teaching more effective and more enjoyable.

Creating Photo Roll Cards

At the end of the first day of class take a head-and-shoulders photograph (about 9cm by 13cm) of each student. This usually takes about 10 minutes. By taking the photos yourself, you will ensure a uniform and complete set of photos. Before the next class, have the photographs developed and buy a set of self-sticking labels. These are readily available in most stationery or office supply stores. If you have many large classes, color code each class by running a different colored marker for each class down the edge of a set of labels. If you cannot find self-sticking labels, you can always use paper and glue.

At the beginning of the second class, draw a large rectangle on the board to represent the photograph. Then draw a simple face in the upper part of this and a smaller rectangle below the face to represent the label which will be affixed to the bottom half of each student's photo.

To demonstrate the procedure, ask one of the students to come to the board and print his or her name in English at the top of the smaller rectangle, and his or her student registration number below this if your school uses these. Then, have the student find his/her photograph, write his/her name on the label, and then give these to you. You then stick the label onto the photograph and show the finished product to the class.

Once all the students understand the process, spread out the photographs and labels and ask the students to locate their photographs, put their names on the labels, stick them on the photographs, and then give these photo cards to you.

While the students are doing this, walk around the room and make sure that the students are correctly filling in and attaching the labels. It is a good idea to have a few extra labels in case a student makes a mistake.

Using the Photo Roll Card File for Identifying, Monitoring, Recording, and Responding

The photos with labels can easily be used to identify students, and you can carry them with you to class. In addition, I have found that having my students write their names in English, and in my case Chinese characters, has made it much easier for me to discuss students with teachers and staff, all of whom speak English. By showing them the card, it is very easy for the non-English-speaking staff to identify whom I am talking about and to find the information I need.

Monitoring, recording, and responding is where photo roll cards are most useful. I use the back of the photos for these purposes. You will need a pen with indelible ink to write on the photos. However, if this is a problem, you can mount the photos on a small card.

There is not a lot of room on the back of the photos so you will have to use some form of shorthand notation. For example “irregular verbs” to indicate that the student needs work on irregular verbs, or “movies” to indicate that he or she likes movies. This may take a little getting used to, but I have not found it to be a problem.

At the beginning of each class I use the cards to call roll. If a student is absent I put his/her photo aside. Either during or at the end of class, I take these cards and mark any absences by making a quick notation in the upper left-hand corner of the back of the photo. I usually write the date so that I will know what the student missed in class that day; however, if you only want to record absences then a simple X is enough.

Divide the remaining space on the back of each photo roughly into half. Use one half to monitor and record, and the other for responses. In the monitoring and recording half, in addition to absences, I record information, like particular pronunciation and grammar problems. I make it a habit to review the backs of the photos before class so I can target a particular student's problems and provide individualized help. When a student no longer seems to need help with a particular item, I cross it out. This allows me to see at a glance both what each student has accomplished and what he/she still needs to work on.

On the other half, I write down information that the students have mentioned in class about family, hobbies, interests, and anything else that allows me to respond to a particular student as an individual. I have found that this has been one of the best uses of the photo roll cards. By using this information I can personalize the class more than I would normally be able to do with a standard roll book or an extensive and cumbersome, system of notes.

For example, I had a student who was not very interested in English but who was very interested in basketball. I noted this on the back of his photo, and whenever I could, I asked him about basketball. So, when we were working on the simple past tense, I asked him to tell the class about the last basketball game he had seen. This motivated him to participate in class. As Rivers

and Temperley (1978:58) have pointed out, “Steady improvement will come only from individual motivation and purpose: that personal desire to perfect one’s communicative effectiveness which is stimulated by genuine interest in what one is doing.” Had I not noted this student’s interest on the back of his photo, I would have forgotten his interest and missed the opportunity to motivate him. This technique has increased my enjoyment in teaching and motivated my students to study English.

Other Ways to Use Photo Roll Cards

In addition, I use photo roll cards for group and peer work. I use the cards to divide the students into small groups. The information on the back of the cards can be used to divide the students into particular interest or ability-level groups. To do this, call out the students’ names as you arrange the photos in groups. If you put the groups of photos on your desk as you call the names, you can readily see which students belong to which group.

I have also found the cards a good way to have pairs work in peer-monitoring situations. I refer to the back of the cards to see which students are particularly good at a certain item and which need help with that same item. Peers can be very effective teachers, not only in providing information in the native language that a nonnative speaker would find difficult to provide, but also in giving an “insider’s” perspective on the process of language learning.

Conclusion

At the end of the year I return the photos to the students. Most of them are surprised to see how they have changed during the year. They always seem to enjoy looking at their own and classmates’ pictures. In addition, the information on the back of their cards allows the students to see what they have learned and what they need to work on.

I am sure that once you start using these photo cards you will discover many more innovative and interesting ways to use them to enhance the teaching and learning of English. The effort required to set up this system is well worth the benefits to teachers and students because it will minimize the monitoring of students in large classes.

References

Rivers, W., and M. Temperley. 1978. A practical guide to the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. New York: Oxford University Press.

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